

“Four Women,” Three Songs: Nina Simone’s Voice (as Sound Object) in Global Hip-Hop Sampling

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Abstract

This article explores the transformative power of hip-hop sampling in reshaping the legacy and cultural resonance of American vocalist, pianist, and composer Nina Simone. Simone's voice, known for its potency in protest songs, continues to find new life in contemporary hip-hop and popular music. Through an examination of two hip-hop songs, Jay-Z's "The Story of O.J." and Polish rapper/DJ duo Fisz and Emade's "Heavi Metal," this article delves into the complex process of cultural reterritorialization, wherein Simone's voice is repurposed to convey new meanings and contexts within and beyond her original cultural identity. These case studies, set against the backdrop of American and European hip-hop, shed light on the global reach of Simone's voice as it functions as a cultural authenticator for Jay-Z and a nostalgic element for Fisz, often diverging from the original Black feminist message. The examination also extends to the visual realm by exploring how the music videos accompanying Jay-Z and Fisz's works contribute to the reception and interpretation of the sampled materials. Ultimately, this essay underscores the dynamic nature of cultural phenomena, highlighting how Simone's voice continues to evolve, resonate, and inspire across generations and geographies, transcending its original context to tell new stories.

Keywords

Sampling— Hip-Hop — Black feminism — Nina Simone

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Introduction

In January 2023, *Rolling Stone* Magazine released its list of the “200 Greatest Singers of All Time.” American vocalist, pianist, and composer Nina Simone was chosen as #21, described for the potency of her protest songs and *métier* of vocal delivery: “the euphoria pulsing through her voice spoke for itself.”¹ Simone was an activist, poet, songwriter, bandleader, feminist, and scholar who has long been praised for her role as a key figure in sonically charging the civil rights movement with her protest and freedom songs.² While her

¹ Rolling Stone, “The 200 Greatest Singers of All Time,” *Rolling Stone.com*, January 1, 2023.

² For more about Simone’s musical impact during the Civil Rights movement, see Tammy L. Kernodle, “‘I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free’: Nina Simone and the Redefining of the Freedom Song of the 1960s,” *Journal of the Society for American Music* 2, no. 3 (2008): 295-317, doi.org/10.1017/S1752196308080097.

indelible mark on the musical (and sociocultural) landscape of African American creative output is undeniable, a newer generation of listeners may perhaps first encounter Simone's voice as sampled audio in an R&B or hip-hop song rather than in her original work, capturing the grain of her voice without the potency of her visible presence.³ According to Barthes, this grain is of the body and not universally understood. Here, grain represents the presence of Simone embodied in the singing voice, allowing her sound to carry ideas of her "self" as a sound object for other generations to acknowledge.

Sampling is a prominent practice in the production of hip-hop and popular music, utilizing existing sonic materials from previous recordings. In this article, I consider how the imaginative repurposing of Simone's voice in two hip hop songs creates new contexts of understanding that demonstrate the potential for sampled voices (and the individuals they represent) to be given new lives and meanings within and outside of their lived cultural identity. Further, I will focus on her 1966 song "Four Women" and its sampled use in African American rapper Jay-Z's 2001 song "The Story of O.J." and Polish rapper/DJ duo Fisz and Emade's 2008 song "Heavi Metal," analyzing their use of her work while considering the following questions: What is gained in each context from the clear use of her vocal styling and musical material? What is celebrated or occluded about her identity and the song's original meaning in sampling her voice within the context of each song? How are the artists' ambitions relative to Simone's sampled materials communicated to the listener?

I use these songs as case studies because of their geographical and cultural distance and difference, adding to discourse on musical borrowing by considering American and European hip hop sampling of a single artist. I explore the use of Simone's work through a Black feminist lens while situating the global use of her voice as an act of "cultural reterritorialization," a concept created by James Lull to describe the "process of active cultural selection and synthesis drawing from the familiar and the new."⁴ In doing so, I demonstrate the mobility of cultural phenomena transcending original functions, with Simone's sampled voice functioning as cultural authenticator for Jay-Z and nostalgic longing for Fisz without signaling the song's original Black feminist message. I additionally explore the music video for the work of Jay-Z and Fisz to understand how the musical messages, including Simone's voice, permeate the visual and to what effect.

Simone as Authenticator in Modern Hip-Hop Recording

Nina Simone, born Eunice Kathleen Waymon in 1933, grew up in Tryon, North Carolina in a religious home filled with music. Her mother, a Methodist preacher, played the piano as many members of her family did, but Simone excelled. She flourished as a local celebrity throughout her youth, nurtured by her piano teacher who taught her classical music. Simultaneously, she enjoyed the Black religious and popular music styles of her era at home and at her mother's church.⁵ These musical roots shaped her experimental musical style, which often juxtaposed seemingly opposing genres, like soul and showtunes as in her protest song, "Mississippi Goddam," first released in 1964. Simone was powerful and proficient on the piano, and longed to become a celebrated African American pianist. She left home for Atlantic City, New Jersey, where her unapologetically expressive, unapologetically woman, and unapologetically Black performance style gained

³ Roland Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-1980* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985).

⁴ James Lull, *Media, Communication, Culture: A Global Approach* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), 161.

⁵ Mark Anthony Neal, "Simone, Nina," *Grove Music Online*, January 31, 2014.

her notoriety.⁶ Her idiosyncratic stage presence was bursting with spontaneity from dance breaks and pianistic improvisation.

Nina Simone’s “Four Women” was released on her 1966 studio album *Wild is the Wind*. Since that time, it has been a rich site of musical exploration for multiple artists. Nearly 140 songs sample Simone’s work, the majority being by hip-hop artists. As Salamisha Tillet has claimed, these artists use Simone’s sound to “[mark] their virtuosity and political allegiances,”⁷ since “sampling’s aesthetic project is one of recombination and recontextualization.”⁸ With this understanding, it can be assumed that the combination of her vocals and instrumental arrangement provides its distinct qualities to the work of hip-hop artists, who also benefit from her cultural capital and reputation, whether they do so consciously or unconsciously. The qualities of Simone’s work are understood in her role as a culture bearer, respected for her musical contributions and known through her sound, which is recontextualized with the work of newer artists for their benefit.

As other scholars have identified, sampling Simone’s work, and that of other female vocalists and instrumentalists, is one way “women have influenced rap style and technique, ultimately shaping aesthetic standards and technological practices,” although, they also assert, “pre-existing masculinist scripts and sexist practices” have “ensured the greater visibility of men’s prerogatives and perspectives relative to women’s.”⁹ The presence of sampled materials from the work of female vocalists and songwriters have not transformed the lyrical content, though they are recognized for their aesthetic merit. Simone’s voice is not connected to her embodiment or presence, effectively creating temporal and technological distance. Instead, her voice represents her as what Vanessa Chang refers to as “sound-as-object,” placing Simone in the realm of representing a time, a feeling, or something other than herself – a common understanding of recorded song where sound initiates and shapes the creative process.¹⁰

“Four Women” is inherently engendered with Black feminine rage, something I define within this work as Black women’s justifiable response to suppression, rejection, and misogynoir as a form of postcolonial protest that is embodied and performed productively through creative mediums. Simone is singing this protest and playing it on the piano, a productive rage, a sounding of her embodied knowledge of oppression. Though rage is often understood as an extreme expression of anger or frustration, it can manifest with control, possessing the ability to reflect an amalgamation of diverse emotions expressed in manageable bursts. Moya Bailey articulates motivation for Black feminist rage by building on the work of Black feminist scholars like Kimberlé Crenshaw by further acknowledging how feminist theory and antiracist discourse are often exclusionary as they intersectionally erase Black women through a theoretical

⁶ Neal, “Simone, Nina.” Nadine Cohodas, *Princess Noire: The Tumultuous Reign of Nina Simone* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 63-70. Kernodle, “I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free,” 300.

⁷ Salamishah Tillet, “Nina Simone and Her Hip-Hop Children,” *American Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (2014): 121, doi.org/10.1353/aq.2014.0006.

⁸ Vanessa Chang, “Records that Play: The Present Past in Sampling Practice,” *Popular Music* 28, no. 2 (2009): 146, doi.org/10.1017/S0261143009001755.

⁹ Layli Phillips, Kerri Reddick-Morgan, and Dionne Patricia Stephens, “Oppositional Consciousness Within an Oppositional Realm: The Case of Feminism and Womanism in Rap and Hip-Hop, 1976-2004,” *The Journal of African American History* 90, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 254, doi.org/10.1086/JAAHv90n3p253.

¹⁰ Michail Exarchos, “Sample Magic: (Conjuring) Phonographic Ghosts and Meta-Illusions in Contemporary Hip-Hop Production,” *Popular Music* 38, no. 1 (2019): 33, doi.org/10.1017/S0261143018000685. Chang, “Records that Play,” 146. Chang, “Records that Play: The Present Past in Sampling Practice,” 146.

and political focus on white women and Black men as the majority. She defines misogynoir as “the uniquely co-constitutive racialized and sexist violence that befalls Black women as a result of their simultaneous and interlocking oppression at the intersection of racial and gender marginalization.”¹¹ While her other songs (like “Young, Gifted, and Black” and “Revolution”) advocate for Black humanity, Simone celebrated Black female existence in “Four Women” through the articulation and resistance of four problematic archetypes that perpetuate misogynoir and limit ideas of Black female existence to their service of others.¹²

The first archetypal woman is “Aunt Sarah.” With her Black skin and strong back, she performs the identity of the self-sacrificing enslaved woman this identity calls to lineage. “Saffronia” has yellow skin, existing “between two worlds” because her rich white father raped her Black mother. “Sweet Thing,” the most sexually objectified female archetype, is a tan-skinned sex worker with inviting hips. Finally, “Peaches,” has brown skin and a confrontational attitude resulting from her parents’ enslavement.¹³ The four women do not say what their name is, instead the song asks: “what do they call me?” They each reflect the gaze of others, the imposition of other’s beliefs and notions of value based on the different aspects that are described: this is true of slavery and beyond. Each woman responds “my name is” as a form of submission, accepting the roles into which they are cast and their subsequent societal functions.

The four women are distinguished by their four shades: black, yellow, tan, and brown. This is a spectrum of Black identity that alludes to Simone’s grand message of diversity and humanity in Black female identity and experience. Further, this reflects colorism, a hierarchy of perceived value based on skin color within one race of people. Aunt Sarah, Saffronia, Sweet Thing, and Peaches all carry titles imposed on them that denote worth based on the (predominantly white) male gaze – the patriarchal practice of female objectification and/or sexual valuation defined by male spectatorship.¹⁴ This introduction, as Marcus Pyle has pointed out, merely alludes to the complexity of a song that symbolizes diasporic feminine subjugation, subconscious perpetuation of racial inequality, and the interplay of post-colonial introspective thought as and outside of Black female being – all aspects that are lost in its sampled contexts.¹⁵ In the next section, I examine Jay-Z’s sampling of “Four Women” and argue that the significance of these realities is signaled in Simone’s presence and voice as representations of a cultural historian privy to the racial issues his song discusses: the elder is blessing his offering.

¹¹ Moya Bailey, *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women’s Digital Resistance* (New York: NYU Press, 2021), 1. Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (July 1991): 1241-99.

¹² The song was inspired by the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in September 1963, which killed four young girls in Alabama. Due to this hate crime (committed by a white supremacists), the girls were posthumously awarded congressional gold medals. See Scott Wilson, “Congressional Gold Medal for ‘4 Little Girls’ Killed in ‘63 by KKK,” *The Seattle Times*, May 25, 2013.

¹³ “Four Women,” MP3 audio, track 2 on Nina Simone, *Wild is the Wind*, UMG Recordings, 1966. To view a video of her performing the song, see Nina Simone, [“Nina Simone: Four Women.”](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1R000111111) Youtube.com, February 9, 2013.

¹⁴ Diane Ponterotto, “Resisting the Male Gaze: Feminist Responses to the ‘Normalization’ of the Female Body in Western Culture,” *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 17, no. 1 (2016), 147. This gaze is often guided by societal understandings of hegemonic (or dominant) masculine behaviors, which normalize it. For more on masculinities, see R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

¹⁵ Marcus R. Pyle, “Nina Simone as Poet and Orchestrator,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 33, no. 2 (2021): 146, doi.org/10.1525/jpms.2021.33.2.130.

Calling on a Musical Foremother: Jay-Z is Big Mad

In "The Story of O.J.," Jay-Z responds to a supposed quote from American former football player Orenthal "O.J." Simpson in which he discounted racial discourse to focus on his celebrity status and wealth as he faced convictions for the murder of his ex-wife and her friend: "I'm not black, I'm O.J."¹⁶ Jay-Z, whose real name is Shawn Carter, connects dated stereotypes from slavery to current aspects of Black identity, showing that the titles have changed but Black skin is still understood as the most salient and relevant identity marker and cause for discrimination, something that unifies Black individuals in all positions of power or belonging, and determines their worth in America. The opening lyrics to the song immediately engage the listener, if not for the repeated use of the "n word," though how unapologetically he states this word with different qualifiers that are recognized as indicators of value or class.¹⁷ Jay-Z presents identities in dichotomous relationships to demonstrate that despite their opposing natures their valuation is the same.

Simone's voice and music are heard throughout "The Story of O.J.," increased roughly 25% in speed and livened up with a bass-heavy drum loop. The original key (a minor) is maintained as Jay-Z's song repeats Simone's initial notes on the piano and her first three words, "my skin is." At other points, the listener can hear "my skin is..." with the addition of a "yellow," slightly slowed down and pitched down. Her vocals bring their heaviness, their beleaguered weariness from the racialized existence of decades earlier to aid in furthering Jay-Z's message about Black progress through understanding our position in American society and the creation of generational wealth through financial education.

The song, and its accompanying animated video tackle issues of Black identity, socioeconomic class, and societal power dynamics to promote awareness of the perception of Black communities, from the inside and outside. The video is narrated by "Jaybo," an animated version of Jay-Z, who navigates different environments throughout time and space, focusing on racially charged imagery, like picking cotton in a field and a colored section on a public bus, reminiscent of segregation. Jay-Z's drive for financial stability (as described in the song) reflects his knowledge that his art and expression are forms of self-exposure, valuable products, and his work is the commodification of his existence: "I turned my life into a nice first week release date."¹⁸ He is a brand, and with this awareness, decided to start his own clothing line, record label, and streaming service – commanding power in his industry and as an entrepreneurial figure in the Black community: he and his "niggas takin' real chances."

The lyrical content of Jay-Z's song is not focused on any overt messages about women, but the video imagines women in predictable roles in accordance with societal expectations. One heavy-set woman labors as the "mammy" figure. She has dark skin and is seen washing clothes: she is "Aunt Sarah." Another voluptuous female, wearing only a thong and pasties on her breasts with hair styled like a flapper from the 1920s, parades around a burlesque stage with a crowd of men ogling. This shapely woman confidently

¹⁶ Trent Fitzgerald, "[O.J. Simpson Says Jay-Z Misquoted Him with Lyric on 'The Story of O.J.'](#)," *XXL Magazine*, April 16, 2023.

¹⁷ The song was initially released as a single but appeared on Jay-Z's 2017 album *4:44*, tackling issues of infidelity and loss – two contexts in which he acknowledges female perspectives. You can watch the music video and hear the song on YouTube. See Jay-Z, "[Jay-Z – 'The Story of O.J.'](#)" YouTube.com, July 5, 2017.

¹⁸ "The Story of O.J.," MP3 audio, track 2 on Jay-Z, *4:44*, Roc Nation/UMG Recordings, 2017.

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